

Boom & Bust: Bird stories for a dry country

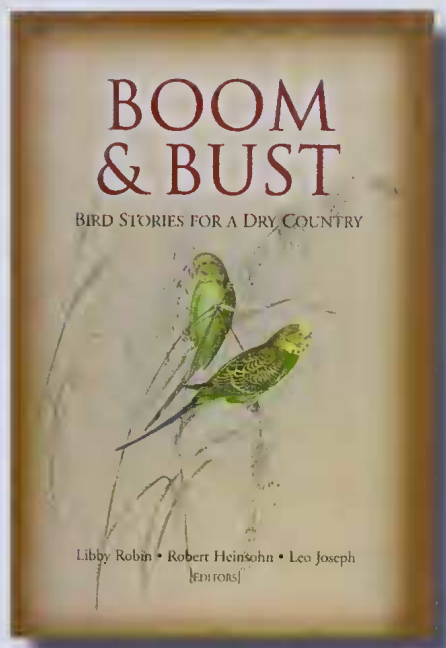
edited by L Robin, R Heinsohn
and L Joseph

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For anyone who has examined ornithological books, it quickly becomes apparent that a lot of space is dedicated to the great bird migrations which can often be tracked with precision through space and time. It is more difficult to find detailed treatments of bird movements which are nomadic and irruptive. This book serves well to fill many of these gaps by examining the less predictable and 'messier' end of the bird movement spectrum, which characterises a significant proportion of the Australian avifauna.

Included are chapters that examine the life strategies and responses of relatively common and widespread birds, such as Zebra Finches, Grey Teal, Australian Pelicans, woodswallows and choughs, to unpredictable conditions in the arid and semi-arid zones of our continent. We often take these birds for granted, but these chapters ensure we will not look at them the same way again. Other chapters cover more enigmatic species such as the Night Parrot, examine the palaeoecology and past climate of Australia by exploring fossil bird evidence and cover indigenous perspectives of faunal responses that indicate fluctuating seasons and climate. Surprisingly, there was only passing reference to the conservation challenges facing birds with nomadic and irruptive life histories and the potential impacts of recent human-induced climate change.

By and large, the chapters are very well written and self contained, meaning that they can be read in isolation. A minority of chapters could have benefited from more thorough editing to eliminate typos, awkwardly-written passages and some misinterpretations of scientific literature. The entire book is well indexed.



This book makes use of endnotes at the conclusion of each chapter which list relevant references but also act to provide additional information and anecdotes of varying levels of relevance to the text. This system unnecessarily lengthens the book (a separate Select Bibliography is also provided). For instance, one chapter has 24 pages of main text and 13 pages of endnotes in reduced font and spacing. A more traditional system of referencing, as used in scientific literature, which was linked to a single reference section at the rear would have been preferable.

The presentation of the book is very simple and elegant. Despite being a hardcover (and encumbered with the endnotes mentioned above) it remains a very compact and portable volume, making it a perfect travelling companion to remote regions where conditions are unpredictable and the cycle of boom and bust prevails. I am sure that anyone who reads this book will learn something new before putting it down.

Mark Antos
Parks Victoria
535 Bourke St, Melbourne